Flowing Through the Time: The Yamuna in Sacred Texts, Cultural Traditions, and Civilizational Memory

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Abstract

Exploring Yamuna's dual identity as a sacred entity and an ecologically endangered river, this paper draws from ancient and contemporary texts supplemented by visual iconography. Examining at close its ritual prominence and mythological underpinnings it focuses on themes including functionality, *vrāta-tīrtha* observances, and divine metaphors. In its formidable stretch of 1,376 kms. Yamuna once sustained a rich biodiversity, testified in the *purāṇas,* but today it faces toxins, barriers and severe degradation. The paper advocates for sensitization and balancing cultural reverence with sustainability, thereby reaffirming Yamuna's historical sanctity and contemporary ecological responsibilities.

Keywords Yamuna, Yāmi, Yama, Krishna, Jumna, Kālindī, sacred, myths, rituals, worship, texts, *purāṇas, Ṛgveda*, Mathurā, Prayāga, visuality, *tīrtha, vrāta,* river, ecology.

Introduction

The Yamuna River, revered in sacred literature as Kālindī, Yāmi, and Krishna's consort—forms an indispensable axis of India's ritual geography and mythic conception. Originating from *Yamunotri* in the Himalayas, the river traversed ancient *mahājanapadas* such as *Kuru* and *Shūrasena* before integrating with the Ganga and the Sarasvati at Prayāga. This paper is based on a sacred literary corpus which includes the Ṛgveda, the *Mahābhārata, Upaniṣads, Brāhmaṇas, Sūtras* and *Purāṇas (Skanda, Agni, Matsya, Padma, Varaha, Bhāgavata, Raghuvaṃśa* and *Viṣṇu*).

The sacredness of Yamuna is embedded not only in the mythic legends but also in the diverse forms of ancient visuality and its immaculate artistic manifestation. Imagery of Yamuna substantially proliferated in the ancient architecture, occurring frequently in a vast area stretching between *Yamunotri* in the North to Raichur in the South and from Darrang in the East to Kumbhalgarh in the West. Temples especially enshrined Yamuna images at their lintels, marking its virtue of facilitating spiritual transcendence and a hallowing capacity.

At its advent in *Yamunotri*, the Yamuna river-bed takes shape as "narrow, deep, and rocky". The surrounding terrain is sharply pronounced with valleys "furrowed by time", and this "torrents into numberless ravines; and down these ravines are seen trickling the numerous sources of this branch of the Jumna" (Fraser 1820: 399, 401, 428). Advancing further and being tributed all along by lesser streams it concludes in Prayāga. The latter place, besides Mathurā, emerged as a great *tīrtha* or spiritual centre, which draws multitudes of devotees locally and globally (Saxena 2018: 76-77, 101). As a holy river Yamuna provides opportunities of worship, pilgrimage, fairs and ecclesiastical observances all along its banks, which have gradually evolved as *ghaṭas*. Correspondingly, in the literary tradition, Yamuna is associated prominently with the institution of *vrāta*.

Exploring Yamuna's dual identity as a sacred entity and an ecologically endangered river, this paper draws from ancient and contemporary texts supplemented by visual iconography. Examining at close its ritual prominence and mythological underpinnings it focuses on themes including functionality, *vrāta-tīrtha* observances, and divine metaphors. In its formidable stretch of 1,376 kms. Yamuna once sustained a rich biodiversity, as testified in the *purāṇas,* but today it faces toxins, barriers and severe degradation. The paper advocates for sensitization and balancing cultural reverence

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Ancient Visuality of Yamuna

While the Sanskrit texts are imbued with iterations of various attributes of Yamuna, an exclusive verse of the *Agni Purāṇa* best resembles with its material visualizing in ancient India. It said, "(The image of the river) Yamuna is worshipped as mounted on the tortoise and as holding a pot in the hand and of dark complexion" (Shastri & Gangadharan 1984, Pt. I, Vol. 27: 133). This visuality, as we know it today, was indeed forgotten, or scarcely known, in the course of time, until Indological discourses of Bühler and Vogel reconfirmed that Yamuna could be identified with such female figurines or statuettes which had tortoise (*kūrma*) as their pedestal (*vāhana*) (Stitencron 2010: 1-5, 72, fn. 18, fn. 22; Burgess 1892: 106, 111; v. 29). In the macrocosmic metaphor, the tortoise embodied aquatic stability, solar potency, the cyclical passage of time, archaic longevity, death, and even somatic *yogīc* physiology—all these layered associations were epistemologically channelled into the narrative of myths through the symbolic orbit of Yamuna's familial interactions; yet, when refracted through the lens of microcosmic reality, this metaphysical abstraction arguably resulted in a discursive digression, where the significance of such symbols exceeded their ritual praxis, visual realities and lived experiences. Conventionally, the riverine images sculpted on the ceremonial architecture added to the sanctity of primary deities enshrined within, besides being mythologically correlated (Chaturvedi 2003: 10; Fraser 1820: 422).

Critics have gone beyond the sense of derivative identity given to Yamuna, which is ingrained in the textual tradition and reasoned that the architectural commemoration of Yamuna on temple walls and door jambs not only denoted its divine value but also the geo-political ambitions of the royal elite patronising the priestly institutions of legitimacy (Stitencron 2010: 24-26, 31-32). Detailed visual and metaphysical analyses have found resonance in the polar pairing of Yamuna with Ganga on intricate temple lintels as well as within the myths. With the exception of *Gargasaṃhitā*, majority of the texts vitalized Ganga above Yamuna by drawing peculiar dichotomies of colour, age, *vaṃśa* and ferocity. Those dichotomies and comparative differences, however, did not perfuse markedly in the iconography of these sacred rivers.

Situating Yamuna in Sacred Cosmogony: Representations in Rgveda

Across various episodes of world mythology and cultures of divine pantheons, there is a recurring myth of divine twins. These twin entities are primarily linked to even older myths relating to genesis, divine procreation, and eventually to the circumstance of a primeval incest (Ward 1968: 3-15). In Egypt they feature as the sky and earth gods Nut and Geb, in Japan as Izanagi and Izanami, and in Persia as Yima and Yimeh. Within the Vedic texts, Yamuna occurs in its primordial *rūpa* i.e., the Yāmi, a divine twin sister to Yama (deity of death), born to the solar couple of Surya-Sanjana.

The *Ṛgveda maṇḍala* X, composed in the 'conversation genre' elaborately described the dialogue of Yama and Yāmi (Doniger 2005: 247-249; Verma 1990: 265-273). In the beginning of this *maṇḍala*, Yāmi is presented in a fit of "companion seeking" attempting to befriend his own twin brother Yama. She is charged with the realization that their natural union was predestined since they were embryonic. Invoking a superior and inviolable divine sanction, Yāmi reasons that "[Tvaṣṭā] decrees a grandson, through me conceived, [and] by you impregnated". But a sober Yama repudiates his entering into "a contact…of this kind", which he sternly finds "impossible" and "delusional", since Yāmi was born of a common womb. He further reasons on the impracticality of committing a "transgression" due to the presence of "Gods, secret agents", "the inheritors of earth [all] who oversee". Such a union, says Yama, "was not done before" and contradicted the "laws of Varuṇa and Mitra".

The underpinnings of this dialogue throw light on the ancient sociological anxieties linked with ideas of endogamous consanguinity and incest (Pradhan 1990: 112, 120-123). Moreover, the rhetoric of disapprobation ingrained in the Yama-Yāmi dialogue is also reflective of the propping of the first legal frameworks regarding relationships in Vedic society. In contrast, the *Ṛgveda* also gives an ethical imagery of Yāmi, by portraying her as a facilitator of positive salvation among mortals. These verses are invocations on part of Yāmi, describing the ideal transcendence into the *pitṛloka* experienced by spirits of the dead who were chaste in their lifetime. Yāmi on her part expressly encourages the chaste spirits to attain their posthumous paradisical rewards metaphorically symbolised by the bodily enjoyment of *soma*, *ghee* and honey. Across varying representations of *Yāmi*, the Vedic emphasis on the obligation of *Ṛta*, establishing the natural order is not diluted (Singh 2008: 197-198).

Purity, Institution of Vrata and Yamuna

The *Skanda Purāṇa* contains a discussion between Brahma and Narada over the sanctity of the 2nd day of Kartikā falling in the *śuklapakṣa*, observed as *Yamadvitīyā* or *Mahōtsarga*. Rituals, worship and donations made on this vital occasion surpassed the vulnerability of mortality and destruction caused by premature death. It also brought salvation, termination of sins and quarrels, besides unlocking of "endless pleasures" and "attainment of *Vaikuntha*". Individuals were expected to arise during *Brahma-muhurta* with a good mental complexion. They were to cleanse themselves by bathing in sacred waters of Yamuna before engaging in worship. This followed expressions of due reverence towards elderly relatives, kinsmen and sisters through salutations, gifts and obeisance. There is a special emphasis on the care of sisters, who were expected to be afforded gifts—reciprocated with blessings and a repast (Bhatt & Tagare 1994: 107-112). The sibling tradition observed on that specific day was traced back to the instance of Yama's reception by Yamuna, when the former was fed and venerated by the latter.

Myths of Yama-Yamuna rendezvous are enhanced in Valakhilyas' description, who iterates how Yamuna repeatedly presented herself before Yama with the hope of catering him. However, Yama procrastinated until a "persistent solicitation" was made to him. Yama then visited Yamuna and was soothed with her warm hospitality. In return, Yama granted her a boon, empowering the redemptive sacredness of her waters. Yama spoke thus, "He who takes his bath in Yamuna and offers libations to *Pitṛs* and *Devas*, he who takes food in the house of his sister and worships her, shall never see the entrance of my abode". Thereafter, the day came to be known as *Yamadvitīyā*. Apart from this day, the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* incentivized prosperity for those who bathed in Yamuna on the twelfth day of *Jyaiṣṭha* (*śuklapakṣa*), and worshipped Krishna. Yet again, the *Agni Purāṇa* recommended to "contemplate the Trivikrama" on the banks of Yamuna. The *Skanda Purāṇa* relates the commemoration of *Vaikuntha Chaturdaśī vrāta* to the worship of Harihara and bathing of devotees in the Yamuna (Saxena 2018: 189).

Contextualizing the Tīrtha Functionality of Yamuna

According to Diana L. Eck, the "locative form of religiousness" and "places, particularly those associated with waters, are often called *tīrthas*, and pilgrimage to these *tīrthas* is one of the oldest and still one of the most prominent features of Indian religious life". She also adds, "the place [or river] itself is the primary locus of devotion" especially as it signifies the spiritual threshold between the *sansāra* and the heavens. Veneration of the river waters, its consumption and bathing, during the *tīrtha* was crucial for attainment of *siddhis* such as ecstasy, conscious clarity, divine protection, spiritual purity and redemption from sins. The doctrine of *tīrtha* was arguably within the scope of common folk and accepted across all *varṇas* and *jāṭis* for induction of spiritualism, the associated *karmic* rewards and to gain wisdom from "holy and philosophic men" already engaged in the locales of the *tīrtha* (Eck 1981: 337, 339).

Even the *Mahābhārata* frequently references the Yamuna as a sacred and

significant site associated with divine births, penance, sacrifice, and pilgrimage. Dvaipāyana (Vyāsa), the Pāṇḍavas' grandfather, was born on an island in the Yamuna, while the *apsara* Adrikā lived in its waters as a fish. Saints like Dhaumyā praised its sanctity as a *tīrtha* and narrated its significance in rituals and worship, including Sahadeva's *dakshina* offerings and Agni worship. Ascetics, including the daughter of King Kasi, practiced extreme and secluded austerities on its banks and even taking their life in its holy waters after years of penance. Kings like Maṟuttā and Bharata performed grand *aśva* sacrifices and *rājasūyayajñas,* in hundreds and thousands, along its banks.

Furthermore, the *Dharmaśāstrās*, the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, and the *Ṛgveda* highly endorsed Yamuna as an important element of *tīrtha* (Kane 1930: 552-567; Saxena 2018: 36, 75). Similarly, in the *Padma Purāṇa* Krishna recounts Yamuna, in his conversion with Venu, while describing the names and characteristics of "excellent holy places" for "destroying all sins". A comparative scheme of bathing exercise in association to the inversely proportional sanctity of the *tīrtha* rivers can be found in the *Matsya Purāṇa* (Dwaipayan-muni 1981: 396). As such, bathing in Yamuna for seven days was believed to bring purity to the devotee. The *tīrtha* reputation of "large rivers", such as Yamuna itself, directly stemmed from the belief that they were "abodes of gods" (Satavalekar 1957: 105).

Yamuna's Tryst with the Krishna-Avatara

The territory of Mathurā (*Sāuryapura* or *Gadavāsana*) in the south-western fringes of upper doab, forms a nexus with the flow of Yamuna (Kane 1930: 686-692). It finds frequent mention in texts like *Pūrvamīmāṃsāsutra, Uttarādhyayanasūtra, Varuṇādigaṇa, Uttarakāṇḍa, Mahābhāṣya* etc. with circumstances of Kansa's destruction by Krishna (the eighth incarnation of Viṣṇu), instances and miracles of the latter's life and stay at Mathurā, its inhabitants, predominant cow-herding economy, agrarian abundance, resources, and ecology. Until Krishna relocated to Dvārakā with the Yadavas, Mathurā remained a vibrant and flourishing settlement.

Most of all, the *Padma Purāṇa*, emphasised on the holiness of Mathurā as a *tīrtha*, especially at its conjunction with Yamuna, where the merits of worship intensified and the receipt of *mokṣa* and *mukti* was ensured. Numerous descriptions in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* enunciate Yamuna as Kālindī, in the setting of Mathurā and its environs of Vrāja. The river became synonymous to the civilizational memory of Krishna's nativity and his maturing into adulthood- marked with divinity. At Krishna's divine conception, "the torrential rain which Indira released had flooded the river Kālindī (Yamuna), lashing into its foamy waves and generating threatening whirlpools. But the river parted, providing a path for Vasudeva [who was carrying Krishna]". Then the, "Adishesha [the divine serpent] with raised hoods followed him, protecting the father and the child from rain like an umbrella" (Tapasyananda 1980: 43-48).

After some years, Krishna, now grown, went to Vṛndāvana forests and Yamuna banks with his friends. Thirst-struck from heat, the boys and cattle drank the river's "poisoned water" and collapsed, only to be revived by Krishna's grace. It was found that Kaliya, a "venomous black serpent" dwelling in a deep cavern within the river, had poisoned the waters, causing widespread death of flora and fauna. Krishna subdued the serpent through his dance. The distressed serpent-wives "assembled to prostrate" before the Krishna and pleaded for Kaliya's release. The pardoned Kaliya was commanded, "not stay in the Yamuna. [As] men and cattle drink its waters" and to relocate to the sea. Krishna then declared, "whoever observes fast here, bathes in these parts of Yamuna... and worships me... he will be released from all sins". From then on, "the water of the Yamuna was rid of poison and became sweet like nectar" (Tapasyananda 1980: 108-118; Chaturvedi 2003: 1-2.).

Another episode, known as the *vastrāharaṇa-līla* highlights Yamuna's presence in Krishna's life. During *Hemanta*, the Gopis bathed in the Yamuna and worshipped goddess Kātyāyanī at its banks, desiring Krishna's espousal. Krishna, by withholding their clothes, taught them not to bathe unclad while performing sacred vows and worship. Upon their prostration, he pardoned the maidens and saw them return

to Vrāja. Comparably, Balarama (Krishna's elder half-brother) once visited Gokul during the *Chaitra* and *Vaishakha*. "Surrounded by Gopis, Balarama sported in the woodlands on the banks of the Yamuna". Intoxicated by Varuni, he summoned the "river Yamuna to flow by his side [and] to facilitate the water sport". When Yamuna did not comply, he "pulled and diverted her course with his plough weapon [hālā] in great anger", threatening to split her "into a hundred channels". Yamuna, emerging as a deity, sought refuge, and was pardoned. "Even today Yamuna is bent at that particular place where Balarama diverted its course" (Tapasyananda 1980: 323-325).

The same *Purāṇa* also vouched for the lesser-known instance of Yamuna's marriage with Krishna. Once, during his stay at Indraprastha, Krishna, accompanied by Arjuna, got engaged in the game of wild beasts. At their exhaustion they went to banks of Yamuna, with the purpose of quenching their thirst. There, the river itself appeared to them as "a very handsome maiden". At that moment, Yamuna introduced herself as Kālindī, as daughter of the solar deity dwelling in the depths of Yamuna where she performed "severe austerities". She clarified, "as a husband, I am seeking Mahavishnu". Krishna immediately, "took her into the chariot" and drove back to the capital. The description follows a gap in the events, which culminates with Krishna's arrival at Dvārakā, where he "solemnised his marriage with Kālindī, to the great joy of all" (Tapasyananda 1980: 288-289).

Conclusion

In ones' explication of the *Gargasaṃhitā*, one realizes at length the various attributes of Yamuna, apart from its forests and ecology. It also defines the rituals, vows and hymns to be recited for gaining the river's blessings (*yamuna-kavacha, yamuna-āṣṭra, yamuna-paddatī, yamuna-sāttva, yamunāṣṭaka, yamuna-māntra and yamuna-sahastrānamam*) (Goswami 2006, Vol. 9: 391-393, 794, 797, 801-837). However, the contemporary urban realities, marked with population growth and the multifaceted impacts of economic liberalization, have brought to the fore pressing concerns about sustainability and socio-environmental justice. The extraction of Yamuna's freshwater for agriculture and drinking, alongside the unchecked release of waste, has turned this sacred river into a virtual "sewage canal" (Follmann 2016: 28-29). The river's increasing toxicity, sarcastically likened to the mythic venom of the serpent Kaliya reflects both symbolic irony and environmental crisis (Dixit 2025: paras 7-12; Chaturvedi 2003: 9). Industrial hazards, released in the waters from East Delhi, Agra and Mathura via leather tanneries, metalworks, and oil refining sectors, severely damage the river's ecosystem long before it flows through downstream districts like Kalpi, Banda, and Hamirpur. Against this backdrop, strategic revival schemes and their effective implementation in the riverfront remains vital for the survival of this ancient river.

Illustration

Yamuna- rising on the kūrma, clasping a pitcher, flanked by tributaries, yakṣī dwarf maidens, a fly whisk bearing Dvārapālaka and an attendant upholding a parasol. Detail from ornate lintel of the Samat-Sarna Shiva Temple in Dipadih, Chhattisgarh. 8th century. Chiselled sandstone. Approx. section length- 2.5 ft. © Authors' Collection.

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